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### The Power of Grotesque Realism and the Theatre of Carnavalesque: A Bakhtian Study of

#### Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco

**Abstract:** The thorough and intensive review of literature of past and present clearly establishes the fact that no study is available on Eugene Ionesco from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin. Ionesco was a Romanian - French playwright who was greatly impacted by the ideas and philosophy of nihilism and death. Ionesco is regarded one of the prime figures of the French Avant-garde theatre. He ridiculed and uncovered the absurdity of human beings. His plays show the seclusion, isolation and irrelevance of human existence in a tangible way. Mikhail Bakhtin put forward the concept of “carnival” and treated it as the most innovative and ground-breaking current of modernity. Bakhtin guarded the carnivalesque literature since it unfetters human spirit and allow human beings to break away and escape from the tensions, anxieties and apprehensions of life. Eugene Ionesco wrote plays in imitation of Bakhtin, Rabelais and Dostoevsky since all his plays are loaded with the

carnavalesque and Grotesque Realism. In this Paper the researcher has taken up the challenge to explore the hidden layers applying Bakhtin's theories of "carnival, carnivalesque, and grotesque realism" in the play of Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco. In Ionesco's Rhinoceros, Berenger the main protagonist obtains freedom from guilt, fretfulness and fear at the end of the play. Plays of Eugene Ionesco like Bald Soprano, Rhinoceros, and The Chairs, are packed with the elements of carnivalesque. After the World War II, Ionesco wrote Rhinoceros to explore the various destructive and harsh impacts of the Fascism, Holocaust, and the Nazi ideology. Here, Ionesco explored how people developed and changed into wild and ugly Rhinoceros. Ionesco takes pride in using weird, strange and bizarre distortions in order to attain grotesque realism in his plays. Ionesco utilized the tools of Grotesque Realism and carnival of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to expose and ridicule the conformist mind-set of people following Nazi ideology thoughtlessly and unseeingly. The plot of the play is packed and loaded with many episodes of love betrayal, unfaithfulness, violence, apathy, exploitation, and the loss of individuality using the tools of grotesque realism and the farcical elements of the comedy.

**Key Words:** Carnavalesque, Farcical, Alienation, Grotesque, Conformism, Alienation

Eugene Ionesco was born in Romania in the year 1912. For many years he spent his earlier days in Paris where he got an opportunity to read the famed and well-known contemporary philosophers because Paris had been a centre of great learning and tradition. Eugene Ionesco was a very creative writer and he wrote more than a dozen plays. His most famous plays are Rhinoceros (1959), The Chairs (1952), The Bald Soprano (1950), The Duel (1971), Double Act (1972), and The Hard Boiled Egg (1966). He was highly praised and much admired as one of the best playwrights. The greater part of the reviewers of Eugene

examined his plays from different viewpoints and perspectives. Brooks Atkinson, Martin Esslin, Tom Driver, Harold Clurman, C.W.E. Bigsby have expressed and stated their opinions on the subjects and the stylistic techniques of Eugene Ionesco. He believed that the real world is full of decay, dishonesty and moral corruption. Ionesco made use of the tools of surreal comic art with an aim to parody the conformism and conventional form of realistic drama. Ionesco was sincerely and wholeheartedly concerned about the condition of man in confronting and tackling the absurdities of existence and the loss of individuality. Ionesco's plays and his engagement in recreation deal with the questions of politics, society, power and corruption, death, and the collapse of language and communication. The plays of Ionesco are hugely famous and they have been a great triumph on the theatre. As Marie-Claude Hubert explains "It is not fascism alone which is condemned, but all forms of fanaticism.... Ionesco distrusts all ideologies' (150).

Bakhtin intensely examined the cultural impact of the "carnivalization of literature". The theories of the grotesque and the carnivalesque was the greatest contribution of Bakhtin propounded in his Ph.D thesis which raised a huge cry in Russia and so was declined by the Russian professors which led to the rejection of degree of Ph.D to Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* explored all the manifold aspects and characteristics of Grotesque Realism and theatre of Carnavalesque of the medieval period.

Bakhtin, a renowned figure in the world for his theory of grotesque realism richly found in the plays from the Greeks to the contemporary drama. The different phases of human body and its functions that are given fresh twists in the dramas to provoke laughter and amusement but in the grotesque conditions the playwright's present facts and reality of life. Bakhtin described the festival of carnival as a great and significant occasion for the commoners to articulate their grievances without least restraint for the betterment of civilization and humanity. He considered it as a great mega occasion where the commoners

spent a lot of time for rehearsals, thus entering into power and creativity and so as a result made many innovations. Bakhtin was deeply influenced by the use of folk culture plus folk carnival comedy in the literature and culture. Rabelais was enthusiastic in folk carnival hilarity and he articulated his mental picture of life through these forms and modes of comedy. Rabelais for Bakhtin was a unique and innovative writer who dared to use the different tools of the carnival to depict the predicament and confronts of the people of his period.

Every play of Ionesco is a free and candid interpretation of existence. For instance, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* represents the ridiculous and ludicrous manner of the conformist ideology of the citizens of Romania who were then turning slaves to the Nazi party of Adolf Hitler in Germany. Following are the own definitions of Eugene Ionesco in *My Theatre and My Critics*: "My plays were perhaps a criticism of the petty bourgeoisie, but the petty bourgeoisie. I was thinking of was not a class linked to a certain society, for the petty bourgeois was for me a being who is found in all societies; the petty bourgeois is simply the man of slogans, no longer thinking for himself, but repeating ready –made truths which others have imposed upon him. In short, the petty bourgeois is the man who is directed (142)".

Ionesco has produced a grotesque metaphor in the play to depict, ridicule and represent the conformist philosophy of the community and its people. All the plays of Ionesco rely on the treatment of language and his chief attention is on how his characters act in response to it, how agents abuse and neglect the supremacy of authority, and how just a single character stands against everything and refused to accept the lure to submit to a mob mentality. Ionesco showed his dilemma thus: He writes: "I no longer believed that I alone could be right against all people . . . I was saying to myself that it would be impossible and I

met several people who had the courage to be isolated from evil and not to believe in evil” (Lamont 38).

Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (1959) was such a great sensation and success in the world of drama that even Martin Esslin included this very play in his book titled as *The Theatre of the Absurd*. With the use of Bakhtin’s tools of Parody and Menippean satire Ionesco exposed and ridiculed the conformity. The Menippean satire is famous for its diverse forms of parody, legendary mockery and mythological burlesque. Eugene Ionesco used Bakhtin’s speculation and theory of grotesque realism in his famous play *Rhinoceros*.

The human body is represented in its flawed and ever-changing form. The grotesque incidents are very frequent, terrible and create the Gothic horror. The farcical parts of comedy provoke laughter and amusement as there are no preset parameters. Ionesco in his play *Rhinoceros* turns a metaphor into realism in order to stay away from real political argument. The special distinctiveness of a *Rhinoceros* is dramatized to mock the mean and mindless conformist attitude of human beings and their ultimate dehumanization. In *Rhinoceros*, the characters are presented as dehumanized, malformed and transformed human beings as they slowly begin behaving like that of animals. Over a period of time, the ordinary people of the town begin changing into rhinoceros in their looks and nature. Language and verbal communication becomes perplexing, with material objects and words creating a sense of danger. In this play the male protagonist watches his friends turning into rhinoceroses one after another until he stands unaccompanied, unchanged and unaffected against this mass movement.

Ionesco fit in to the tradition of the Theatre of Absurd but fascinatingly they used the tools of Mikhail Bakhtin to portray and represent the anxiety, apprehensions, existential despair; and the absurdities of the people who had observed the Great Depression of 1930

and the World War. Bakhtin declared that the comedy is the finest way to conquer the existential pain.

The viewpoint of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus about Existentialism brought the Theatre of the Absurd in Europe and America. Kierkegaard's idea of nothingness and Nietzsche's idea of nihilism led to the loss of faith and belief. Ionesco felt that the world after the Holocaust and so much brutalities of war didn't actually make any sense. Finally every man became as alone as there was no philosophy, belief, faith or religion to give him any moral, ethical and spiritual force. Life became worthless and hollow and all the efforts of man useless and futile. The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus portrays the never-ending plight of a common man in this enormous cosmos.

Showing a great anger against the Nazi ideology, absurdity of its plot and the message of anti-conformity in the play *Rhinoceros*, enthralled the audience to a great extent. As a result of which, Ionesco turned out to be the icon playwright in the association of Genet, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Ionesco sincerely wanted to release and liberate his male protagonist from the societal pressures, delusion, mechanization, loss of faith and belief. Berenger's sincere confrontation to the social forces of conformity, his enthusiasm and passion for Liberty, independence and freedom validate him authentically. In the end Berenger appears to be a very bold figure when he says: "I am not capitulating" (107).

*Rhinoceros* evokes the pictures of uselessness and emptiness of life. Like *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* is not just a tale of two couples but a serious and grim story of human transformation. Lamont realizes that Berenger, the main protagonist of the play stand as a shadow of Eugene Ionesco in his predicament: "In Rumania I remember how everyone around me converted to fascism, till it seemed to me that I was the only one left in the world (Lamont, *The Hero In spite of Himself* (73).



The image of Rhino is influential; its unattractiveness and ugliness rouses lots of amusement and laughter in the play but along with that its destructive and harsh nature excites fear in the audience as well. The tough skin and robust body of rhinoceros represents the obsessive, domineering and tyrannical nature of the political leaders. Animal instinct teaches the rhinoceros that power and strength is gained by those who join in big numbers. Jean and Berenger both are good friends but in complete contrast with each other. At one side, Jean who is intellectual and eloquent and Berenger, the main protagonist on the other side is introverted and kind. In the following lines one can see how both during their meet in a coffee house talk about an urgent matter (unspecified).

JEAN: There you are, You see!

BERENGER: What are you drinking?

JEAN: You mean to say you've got a thirst even at this time in the morning?

BERENGER: It's so hot and dry.

JEAN: The more you drink the thirstier you get, popular science tell us that (Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* 10).

The first question of Berenger 'But how can one be a rhinoceros?' is on the ridiculous tradition of carnivalesque. According to Townsend, Eugene Ionesco put up the carnival atmosphere giving comic freedom to his characters to take any appearance they like. The procedure of metamorphosis is characteristically carnival and evokes hilarity. The atmosphere of *Rhinocéros* is just "that carnival-square atmosphere in which abrupt carnivalesque changes of the fates and appearances of people can occur" (Dostoevsky 145). Ionesco is particular in describing everything of the city and the sight of the entire city is a well combination of the grotesque and the real. The description and explanation is indicative of many things like chaos, darkness, disorder etc. Then suddenly a sight is imbued with the



carnavalesque atmosphere of a Sunday afternoon in which people act jointly and intermingle freely with each other.

Berenger's office is the place where the second act of the play is set, here the grotesque scene begins because Mrs. Beouf was being chased by her own husband namely Mr. Boeuf now turned as rhinoceros. There was a lot of commotion, people inside the office were struggling intensely to break free and get away from the office building. When Ionesco takes the Berenger, the main protagonist into the Jean's apartment, that part is the core as the entire act is about the course of Jean's metamorphosis. Here in this scene Jean can be seen turning into rhinoceros. The main grotesque action takes place between the bedroom and the bathroom of Jean where Jean frequently retiring to test his growth of transformation. For Berenger this metamorphosis of Jean was terrible:

BERENGER: But whatever's the matter with your skin?

JEAN: Can't you leave my skin alone? I certainly wouldn't want to change it for yours.

BERENGER: It's gone like leather.

JEAN: That makes it more solid. It's weatherproof.

BERENGER: You're getting greener and greener (64).

The last grotesque action starts with the running away of Berenger from the apartment to aware the concierge who too has been changed and turned into a rhinoceros. The old couple residing there too changed into rhinoceroses. Jean move violently to go out of the building from a window.

Eugene Ionesco sets the last scene of the play in Bérenger's apartment where all the characters like Daisy, Duddard and Berenger listen to the voices of rhinoceros on the telephone and radio preoccupied by the rhinoceros in the city. Berenger at multiple times tried to convince and encourage Daisy that the world is worth saving:

BERENGER: How can we save the world, if you don't?

DAISY: Why bother to save it?

BERENGER: What a thing to say! Do it for me, Daisy. Let's save the world.

DAISY: After all, perhaps it's we who need saving. Perhaps we're the abnormal ones (101).

Here, Daisy speaks in her grotesque language:

BERENGER: It's the rhinoceroses which are anarchic, because they're in the minority.

DUDDARD: They are, it's true-for the moment.

DAISY: They are pretty big minority, and getting bigger all the time. My cousin's rhinoceros now, and his wife. No to mention leading personalities like the Cardinal de Retz...

DUDARD: A prelate!

DAISY: Mazarin! (123).

In the end of the play Berenger in his soliloquy said the following lines: 'I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!' (107).

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